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### Deposited in DRO:

10 June 2016

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Coddington, K. (2017) 'Voice under scrutiny : feminist methods, anticolonial responses, and new methodological tools.', *Professional geographer.*, 69 (2). pp. 314-320.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2016.1208512>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor Francis Group in *The Professional Geographer* on 30/08/2016, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00330124.2016.1208512>.

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# Voice under scrutiny: feminist methods, anticolonial responses, and new methodological tools

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5,133 Words

Accepted as part of a 'Focus Section' on Feminist Methods for *The Professional Geographer*

**Abstract:** 'Giving voice' to participants has been an important element of qualitative feminist research projects in geography. In this article, I explore scholarship that has questioned qualitative research's reliance on voice, arguing that implicit connections between voice, authenticity and empowerment are beginning to be unpacked, particularly by scholars engaged in anticolonial work. I draw on anticolonial scholarship to build upon and extend feminist debates centred on voice and participation. Feminist attention to voice must be situated within the colonial frameworks and histories of social science research. Scholarship focused on ongoing settler colonial relationships highlights methods both for cautiously proceeding with and consciously refusing incorporating voice within qualitative research. I draw on anticolonial approaches to frame research decisions, voice, and the ethical and methodological dilemmas of its use.

*Keywords:* voice, feminist methods, qualitative research, colonialism, proceeding, refusing

Entering the Territorial history section of the Parliamentary Library in Darwin, Australia during research conducted between 2011 and 2012, was an exercise in contrast with the public life in Darwin. Outside, anti-loitering policies had ostracized groups of Aboriginal residents. Inside the library, however, studies of Aboriginal people dominated the archival shelves, a century's worth of documented academic fascination over Aboriginal people's lives. The imposition of the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) policy on Aboriginal residents had reinforced the marginalization of Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia, and their precarious and partial membership in the Australian nation.

As a feminist scholar focused on citizenship and belonging in Australia, I had become troubled by the wide-ranging implications of the NTER for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. However, I hesitated when confronted with the wall of studies focused on Aboriginal communities in the archive; its breadth exemplified the continuing colonial

underpinnings of social science research and its enthrallment with the study of others—particularly racialized, colonized, and Aboriginal others. Yet as a feminist, I had internalized linkages connecting particular qualitative research methods that prioritized the use of voice with authentic and empowering research (e.g. Morrow et al., 2014). These internalized assumptions sat uneasily with the colonial academic practices that demanded Aboriginal voices, propelling me to scrutinize the implicit assumptions, continuing critiques, and possible creative directions around voice for feminist, anticolonial geographic scholarship.

The depth of the colonial archive on Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory served as a constant backdrop to complex encounters throughout the research process. It underpinned decisions I made to work alongside Aboriginal community members protesting the day Australia celebrated the arrival of British colonizers, but never to press for formal interviews with these community members. It contributed to my reliance on secondary sources, public events, and independent media sources. Places where Aboriginal community members, advocates, and allies voiced their opinions about controversial policies were not always interview settings, I learned, and I repeatedly re-drew the boundaries of my research to address my discomfort with the colonial reach of social science research practices.

In this article, I explore arguments that have questioned feminist, and particularly, feminist qualitative research's reliance on voice. Implicit connections between voice, authenticity and empowerment are beginning to be unpacked, particularly by feminists engaged in anticolonial work. I build on the work of scholars such as Hunt (2014) and de Leeuw et al. (2012) to argue that feminist geographical attention to voice must be situated within the colonial frameworks of social science. I focus on anticolonial work primarily by scholars of settler colonialism, which refers to a particular form of colonial occupation characterised by permanency, sovereign control, and the desired replacement over time of indigenous people by the settlers themselves (Cavanaugh and Veracini, 2013). I begin by

summarizing critiques about voice in qualitative research projects, and then turn to colonial assumptions underlying these critiques. Next, I draw on anticolonial feminist responses to use of voice in research to describe what I argue are two creative directions for grappling with issues of voice: proceeding and refusing. Each offers potential for productively complicating dilemmas like I encountered in the Darwin archive. Refusing and proceeding also relate to epistemological questions underscoring what social science research does. How do we negotiate the sources of and limits to social science knowledge production? I suggest here that renewed attention to the colonial context of research may push feminist geographers to produce work that is more complex, relevant, and nuanced, and is also better accountable to people's lives.

### **Voice under scrutiny**

A central goal of initial feminist projects within geography was to make women's experiences, knowledges, and voices heard within academic research. The idea, as Morrow et al. (2014: 6) summarize, is that "by giving voice to the silenced, making the private public, and memorializing the mundane," feminists could contribute towards the empowerment of research subjects and expand the scope, importance, and relevance of research conclusions. Early feminist geographical scholarship highlighted the influence of gender for research problems, objectives, epistemologies, and methodologies (Monk and Hanson, 1982).

Feminist researchers also appealed to voice to authenticate research findings. Grounding research in the experience and voices of participants provides a strong feminist counter to the objectivity of masculinist science (McDowell, 1992; England, 1994). Interviews as well as confessional, multivoiced, or personal narrative projects all share the assumption that voices 'prove' the realness of the work. Feminists turn to voice in order to reduce the appropriation of others in research projects, and it is argued that uncovering

silenced voices has been an important element in expanding the terrain of geographical thinking (see e.g. Hyams, 2004; Liu, 2006; Robinson, 2003; or Valdivia, 2009). Yet feminist geographers have also repeatedly turned a critical eye to issues of voice, representation, and participation (see e.g. Liu, 2006; Nagar et al., 2002; Peters, 2004; Valdivia, 2009; Wilson, 2005). The possibilities and challenges regarding research giving voice to participants critique the assumption that voice simply translates into empowerment; as Hyams (2004, 113) notes, “power is more entangled than that.”

The emancipatory intentions of incorporating feminist voices into research through both participation and research design have also been critiqued because of the researcher’s implicit and inappropriate “wish for heroism,” as scholars outside of geography have also discussed (McWilliam et al., 2009). Assumptions of individual empowerment tend to obscure the larger context of power relations in which the voices are shared, recorded, and analysed, echoing Scott’s unpacking of the use of experience as an unquestioned basis for analysis (Scott, 1991). If experience is presented uncritically as a foundation for analysis, scholars lose the capacity to contextualize that experience within relations of power and explore the production of experience and how it in turn constitutes subjects. Settler colonial scholarship has specifically explored the *imperial* dimensions of basing scholarship on decontextualized, individual experiences (Bonds and Inwood, 2015). For example, Tuck and Ree (2013, 640) note the importance of decontextualized individual experience for imperial national histories.

The terms of settler colonial knowledge... require the separation of the particular from the general, the hosted from the host, personal from the public, the foot(note) from the head(line), the place from the larger narrative of nation, the people from specific places...

Such imperial disciplinary histories constrain how scholarship is produced. The social sciences are designed to divide researchers from their subjects of research. For example, Peters (2004) critiques the continued colonial nature of the researcher’s relationship with their research subjects, noting that even for researchers who attempt reflexivity within

research, this process is often one of solitary reflection by an isolated researcher rather than an ongoing *relationship* constructed between researcher and the community that takes an interest in the project's results. The production of disciplinary knowledge is shaped by the context of imperial legacies, ongoing settler colonial relationships, unequal class, race, and gender divisions, and an increasingly corporatized university culture, relationships that have everything to do with voice in research projects.

Feminist geographers and other scholars have begun searching for ways to engage with participants that take into consideration power relations and the co-production of researcher and subjects of study during the research process. Each new attempt brings along its own challenges. Mazzei and Jackson (2009, 4), for example, contest the notion that unedited transcripts or a multiplicity of voices bypass issues with voice, instead asking how “putting privileged understandings of voice under poststructural scrutiny [could] result in a positioning of voice as *productive* of meaning?” Participatory research frameworks, where participants engage with research design and share in the project outcomes, also come under similar scrutiny. Participatory projects struggle to connect research with demands for structural or larger-scale change (DeLyser and Sui, 2014) and assumptions that participation alone resolves ethical issues related to voice, representation, and consumption are problematic (Mohan, 1999).

Others argue that perhaps better listening strategies are key. Kanngieser (2012), for example, stresses the importance of inflections, tones, and the geographies of voice itself for the production of power relations and subjectivities. Silence, Hyams (2004, 115) argues, could also be an unbalancing force in analysis, inspiring questions about content, methods, and even scholars' “prerogative to know” in the research process. Similar considerations underlie Morrow et al.'s (2014, 6) exploration of online research spaces, which have their own “virtual-material positionality” that trends towards the elite and privileged.

Despite the creativity that underlies the search for new voices and different methods of interpretation, underlying the issues with voice are questions feminist geographers have continued to ask about the qualitative research process: what kind of assumptions underscore the construction of particular truths? How does a researcher gauge authenticity? And how are particular subjectivities ascribed to research participants? (Morrow et al., 2014). As Ahmed (2007, 165) writes, “new tricks” are not necessarily going to solve the problems inherent with voice and representation: “it is by showing how we are stuck... that we can keep open the possibility of habit changes, without using that possibility to displace our attention of the present, and without simply wishing for new tricks.” The urge to retreat or limit oneself to autoethnography is important, but issues of representation occur even when representing oneself—and as Katz (1996, 177) writes, retreating away from voice can reach an “unproductive internal vanishing point.” More may be accomplished by attending to the productivity of voice, rather than give up (Katz 1996; Jackson, 2009).

### **Voice and colonialism**

The issues with voice and representation in qualitative research projects raised by critics are closely related to the close relationships between colonialism and the social sciences. In Darwin, for example, the latest generation of Aboriginal community leaders had spent five years fighting the policies of the NTER, and as an advocate explained, “The [local Aboriginal] community is exhausted. The five women who have all their shit together get pulled in every direction, they have to keep their families running, they get exhausted. Also, no one listens. Why bother?” (Coddington, fieldnotes, January 26, 2012). As I struggled to reconcile feminist research frameworks that prioritized the authenticity and empowerment of speaking out (or speaking to a researcher) with the obvious precariousness of Darwin’s

Aboriginal community, I realized that I could not bear to further perpetuate colonial demands on the exhausted community leaders.

In this section, I build on contemporary debates within feminist geography about participation and voice (e.g. Mahtani 2014; Moss 2012) by drawing on anticolonial scholarship. Anticolonial scholarship situating qualitative research within its colonial history helps to frame issues of voice such as my struggle in Darwin, as the researcher's desire to create authenticity through voice becomes aligned with colonial power structures. Such ethical issues have led to the creation of institutional review boards (IRB), but the complexity of issues surrounding voice suggests a need for creative directions beyond the IRB (see Blake, 2007; Bradley, 2007; Martin and Inwood, 2012; and Price, 2012).

Geographers have explored the racialized, colonial histories involved in the development of human geography and feminist geographers in particular have grappled with the challenges of studying others (e.g., Moss, 2002; Moss and Falconer al-Hindi 2008; de Leeuw et al., 2012). Geographers such as Valdivia (2009) and Peters (2004) have articulated how the poor representation and invisibility of indigenous people within geography hurts the field as a whole. Yet efforts to incorporate marginalised voices suffer too, Robinson (2003) and Liu (2006) argue, from a tendency to use these voices only as a means to authenticate research findings. Geography's colonial heritage is intimately connected with the correlation between particular voices and authenticity, and marginalized communities have increasingly employed what Hodge and Lester (2006, 45) call the "most powerful of weapons to counter such attempts; the power to say 'no' to research." The colonial legacies of the academy connect the desire for knowledge of the Other with the taken-for-granted *right* to that knowledge (Tuck and Yang, 2014, 224).

The colonial demands of academia permeate into all aspects of the qualitative research process. Often, divisive or controversial topics of qualitative research are designed



to meet the needs of the academic rather than the indigenous community, and research that seeks to meet community needs proves too challenging to the researcher's own identity and practices to be undertaken (Hunt, 2014). Hunt (2013, 2) concludes that, "the voice I raise is at once Indigenous and scholar, though it feels impossible to be heard as both at the same time."

The colonial research encounter that involves an "expert" studying an indigenous other *makes available* a specific set of voices; indeed, the constellation of voices that social science research prioritizes—the authentic, the embodied, those in need of empowerment—tend to be implicated in colonialism. Colonialism underscores not the existence of the "expert" or the indigenous voice but the *relationship* between the two (Tuck and Ree, 2013, 649). The set of voices available to the researcher are framed by asymmetrical power relationships, a focus on suffering, and characterized by ethical dilemmas not adequately addressed by academia. Indeed, as de Leeuw et al. (2012, 187) write, even when researchers' own ethical commitments to indigenous communities prioritise long-term, meaningful relationships, these relationships are jeopardised by the institutional demands of the academy itself.

Asymmetrical power relationships underscore colonial academic projects, and are central to issues of voice and representation. The desire to speak—or write—on behalf of another is always a desire to dominate the encounter, as scholars of whiteness and colonialism conclude. For example, anticolonial scholar Moreton-Robinson (2000, 1) concludes that "textual landscape" of Australian colonial history has actively erased Aboriginal women's subjectivities, representing them as objects in need of colonial protection. The issue of giving voice to participants is a debate accessible only from positions of relative privilege; voice becomes a tool that is available to work with because of ongoing colonial power relationships. Ahmed (2007, 154) frames debates over the utility of whiteness in terms of orientations, that whiteness is passed down to people as a "reachable" entity—

race becomes, she writes, “a question of what is in reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with...” Colonial power relationships become accessible in a similar manner, inherited through disciplinary training, social positioning of the academic expert, and cultural accessibility of the authentic indigenous informant.

Through uneven relationships of power, particular colonized voices become accessible to the researcher. They become valuable, scholars have argued, through demonstrations of their authenticity, which is often measured through their suffering. Scholars who gravitate towards voices who have suffered may have intentions of empowering or giving voice to marginalized people, but, “academe’s demonstrated fascination with telling and retelling narratives of pain is troubling, both for its voyeurism and for its consumptive implacability” (Tuck and Yang, 2014, 227). Using suffering as a measure of authenticity also strips marginalised community members of potential agency, and as Nagar et al (2002, 271) write, “actively engaged in struggles over access to resources and the very definitions of development, progress, empowerment, and justice.” Repeated stories of passive victimization become subsumed into a coherent recovered individual self, which again erases power inequalities and structural context.

Critics argue that turning to the academy to address these types of ethical issues, especially in a settler colonial context, is highly problematic. Academic institutions have turned to their IRBs in order to address ethical issues, but their embeddedness in colonial academic cultures renders them ineffectual, especially in research contexts involving indigenous participants, as many scholars (Hodge and Lester, 2006; Smith, 2005) have documented. Like the other possible fixes for problems of voice and representation proposed by geographers, the IRB offers a partial and potentially damaging resolution to issues, as researchers may assume that in fulfilling the IRB requirements that they have put to rest any ethical debates. The many critiques of the IRB include modelling risk and participation after

biomedical, rather than social science, research practices; conceptions of individualized risk and confidentiality inappropriate to indigenous contexts; lack of impetus to include participants in research design; and assumptions of researcher expertise compared with participant ignorance or naiveté (see Blake, 2007; Bradley, 2007; Martin and Inwood, 2012; and Price, 2012). The IRB represents one response to some of the ethical dilemmas I faced in Darwin, providing guidance on issues of consent and data management, but it does not address some of the questions raised within a settler colonial context related to voice and participation in qualitative research projects.

It is important not only to consider the moment of encounter within the research project, which perhaps could be framed by questions about consent, risk, and power imbalances between researcher and participant, but to consider the wider structures of power within which the research encounter takes place. Within settler colonial power structures I argue that colonized voices are made available differently, their pain becoming a desirable measure of research authenticity. If the IRB does not take up wider issues of power, colonialism, and research ethics, than what other tools do we have?

### **Creative directions: proceeding and refusing**

To take seriously the problems of voice, especially the colonial relationships that affect how voice is made available, judged, and imperfectly grappled with, is to question important aspects of qualitative research: what is the point? What does, or can, research *do* (Hunt, 2014; de Leeuw et al., 2012; Mahtani, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2014)? By interrogating the use of voice, critics present fundamental epistemological challenges to social science. How do we come to know through research? What is the source of our knowledge? And what are its limits? Asking what research *does* gestures towards not only to the work of research as a self-contained moment of knowledge production, but situates it within a historical, power-

laden and complex context. Research that *does* is research that is grounded in place, time—and takes account of its consequences for people’s lives. This section explores two possible responses to the accounting of research and its doing, which I term proceeding and refusing. Both offer creative methods of holding onto the complexities of voice and colonial power relations within the research process without attempting full resolution.

Proceeding with research could involve exposing the difficulties and complexities of voice within the project design and writing process. As I imagine it, proceeding refers to not just doing research and glossing over the uncomfortable decisions made along the way, but conducting research by *dwelling* in those methodologically complex places, as well as the difficult practical considerations—funding, career stage, time limitations—that also shape decisions. Consider not only what the considerations for the use of voice were, but also: Where did the project stumble? Where did disciplinary pressures shape methodological choices? How did these choices reflect or challenge ethical considerations? Here, I draw a parallel with Rosenberg’s (2014) process of reading complex and intimidating writing. She (2014, 1) argues that,

You have to subject yourself to the difficulty of [the] language in order to begin to unstitch the only-seemingly coherent logics ... that you have grown accustomed to, that has been made natural to you... being lost in this particular way is related to having—or developing—a political life.

Her argument is that introducing complexity requires learning how to un-know, a political act that prompts questions about how we engage with the world. Doubling back on voice—using it but questioning it, engaging with partial fixes and imperfect ethical frameworks—is perhaps a similar strategy to provoke more questions, doubts, and political engagement.

Methodological complexity is not simply a strategy for prompting questions, but is also settling for not knowing the answers. To doubt the process of research underscores the shiftiness of our analysis as well: we may have to sit with indefinite uncertainty. Lather (2009, 18) questions whether research could be a “mode of thought that refuses to secure

itself with the security of understanding.” Exposing research to continued unknowns through doubled back questions of voice and method disrupt smooth narratives of knowledge production as linear processes, instead positioning research as disruptive, unruly, and continually challenging the right of the scholar to the voice—and the knowledge—in question (Lather, 2009, 22). Jackson (2009, 165) characterises disruptive research like this as “provoking, not representing, knowledge.” In Darwin, I spent months sitting with the twin desires to push for more interviews with individual Aboriginal community leaders and my growing doubts about the necessity and desirability of demanding the time, energy, and *voice* of exhausted people. The time I spent in the midst of indecision and the ways I began to work within the bounded space of research I constructed were not wasted, however, they instead represented integral parts of how I *proceeded* with the research the best way that I could.

Another response to asking what research does is to say: not enough. Such decisions represent, following Simpson (2007), moments of *refusal*. Perhaps the researcher preemptively decides the outcome of the research process, perhaps there is not enough new or relevant information to merit a research project—or alternatively, perhaps there is simply too much at stake (Wilson, 2005). Simpson (2007, 78) writes about the moment of enough, when she understood that the research process involved too many risks for the participant community: “the ethnographic limit was reached not just when it would cause harm (or extreme discomfort)—the limit was arrived at when the representation would... compromise the *representational territory* that we have gained for ourselves in the past 100 years...” In all of these cases, the researcher has the responsibility to assess whether research is indeed the appropriate method of responding to questions—a careful researcher could, from the onset, determine that certain projects are off-limits. Or, in other cases, participant refusal determines that for researchers instead.

Constantly stressing participation and consent within frameworks like the IRB obscures the importance of refusal within the research process (Hodge and Lester, 2006). Refusal can operate on multiple levels, particularly in the settler colonial context, Simpson (2007) concludes: there is the refusal of the potential participant to engage with the research process, or conversely the decision of the researcher to refuse to engage potential participants, but there is also the powerful tactic of refusal by communities to engage with the colonial logics that structure research processes (see Hodge and Lester, 2006; Louis, 2007; Wilson, 2005). Refusal could be a redirection, a method, a mode of representation, she argues, and every instance of refusal is particular. Multiple levels of refusal can operate simultaneously, she (2007, 74) writes, as in the example of the research participant who claims: “I am me, I am what you think I am and I am who this person to the right of me thinks I am and you are all full of shit and then maybe I will tell you to your face.”

Refusal to engage with the research process is not necessarily the same as silence, Louis (2007) argues, but offers the potential for ways of communication and problem-solving outside of social science research. Some questions are not best answered through research, particularly research that taps community voices, as well as other resources. Indeed, Tuck and Yang (2014, 235) conclude that, “some narratives die a little when contained within the metanarrative of social science.” In Darwin, for example, my research involved proceeding in certain ways, refusing others. I refused to push for individual interviews, relying instead on publicly available documents, and media reports that people had made available. I spent more time conducting participant observation, trying to inhabit the uncomfortable physical *and* methodological spaces. Refusal to ask certain questions opened the door for others.

Refusal is an acknowledgement that there are issues outside of social science frameworks, there are logics of being and aspects of knowledge production outside of western academic logics, but it is also a challenge, a statement that there are some problems

that the academy has not earned the right to engage with in particular ways (Peters, 2004). Refusing research involves a calculation of all of these factors. Scholars attentive to the structures of settler colonialism provide important direction for challenging issues with voice. In my experience, engaging these issues involves a complex mix of proceeding and refusing, of bounding research in particular ways and of sitting with uncertainty and unease.

## **Conclusions**

In Darwin, I began to shape a research agenda driven by my uneasiness with methods that prioritized voice. Rather than prioritizing one-on-one interviews, I participated in local advocacy groups. Instead of rehashing painful narratives, I gathered secondary source materials that had already asked the same questions. I reshaped aspects of the project to ask different questions, and when I wanted to share painful stories, I shared my own. The research agenda involved aspects of proceeding and refusing, as I have described in this paper, and suggest the complicated and incomplete engagement with methods that taking seriously issues with voice could involve.

Proceeding offers a space to dwell in the uncomfortable spaces of research that often require meditations on the structures of power in which research encounters and decisions about voice are situated. Proceeding involves making choices, but also engaging with uncertainty and doubt. Refusing involves asking broader questions about the deservedness of social science to engage with particular questions. Refusing requires considering the appropriateness of qualitative research in particular contexts, and being willing to choose against certain paths. Refusing and proceeding thus become avenues for questioning not only the complex issues of voice, but also challenging research practices, knowledge production, and how we come to know what we know.

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